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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to make a preliminary effort to explore subordinate perceptions of authority as measured by semantic differential-type scales through factor analytic techniques in order to determine the dimensional structure which results from subordinate responses to the question of authority use. Descriptions of authority from several disciplines were reviewed to reveal general characteristics of descriptions of authority. Adjectives selected from the literature were presented to 126 subjects as semantic differential type scales with the request that the subjects evaluate family authority figures. The results of the research were interpreted to have supported many of the general characteristics discovered in the literature. Problems of interpretation of factor analytic results and implications for further research are considered. (Author/EB)

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MEASURING PERCEPTIONS OF AUTHORITY

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## ABSTRACT

This paper represents a factor analytic approach to the study of subordinate perceptions of use of authority and was for two purposes. First, the study represents a preliminary step in the development of scales to measure authority variables. Second, the study attempted to test the validity of previous descriptions of authority by testing subordinate responses to the use of authority. A broad range of descriptions of authority from several disciplines were reviewed to reveal general characteristics of descriptions of authority. The descriptions reviewed emphasized legitimacy, acceptance, use of sanctions and numerous styles. Adjectives selected from the literature were presented to 126 subjects as semantic differential type scales with the request that the subjects evaluate family authority figures. Analysis of the data resulted in a six factor solution with dimensions which were labeled indulgence, formality, sociability, firm and directness, supportiveness, and competency. The results were interpreted to have supported many of the general characteristics discovered in the literature. Problems of interpretation of factor analytic results and implications for further research are considered.

There can be little question that the concept of authority is central to understanding organizational behavior. Even in the first decade of the Twentieth Century when management and organizational behavior were just beginning to emerge as areas of scholarly study, Henri Fayol (1956) discussed the concept of authority in management. Fayol's definition of authority as, "the right to give orders and the power to exact obedience," may be somewhat simplistic but it is consistent with what has become known as the formal theory of authority (Koontz and O'Donnell, 1959, p. 48). He placed an emphasis on the power of the authority figure to reward and punish subordinates and he described the variables of intelligence, morality, leadership ability, and experience as significant (p. 21).

A second major figure in early management study was Chester Barnard. He also placed a great emphasis on authority. In his "theory of authority" (1950), Barnard defined authority as, "the character of a communication in a formal organization by virtue of which it is accepted. . ." (p. 163). Barnard developed an approach to describing authority significantly different from Fayol's. He emphasized acceptance of authority by the subordinate. Barnard also discussed position authority and leadership in his writings.

Nearly all authors in the field of management have discussed the concept of authority. Although the labels under which the concept has been discussed have ranged from "authority" to "leadership" to "power" to "supervisory behavior," the central concept is the same. Weissenberg (1971) described power and authority as virtually synonymous. He discussed the concept of

sanctions as essential for the existence of authority and that the concept is symbolically rooted. He noted that authority relations are always unequal and that compliance, acceptance, and legitimacy are key factors in authority.

Koontz and O'Donnell (1959) described authority as, "legal or rightful power; a right to command or to act" (p. 47). Their stance is closer to formal theories than to acceptance theories. These authors used terms such as coercion, reward, supportiveness, persuasiveness, leadership, efficiency, indulgence, cohesion and communication to describe the use of authority. Hersey and Blanchard (1972) discussed leader behavior in terms of laissez-faire, democratic, and authoritarian. They noted that authority has both task and relationship aspects and that structure and personal consideration are important variables. Flexibility and effectiveness were also discussed. In a similar vein, Owens (1973) pointed out that personality is important in authority situations.

In Hampton, Summer, and Webber (1968) a number of authors described authority relationships. Presthus (pp. 472-479) described authority in terms of acceptability, ambiguity, permissiveness, status, friendliness, and sympathy. He also noted the important relationship between symbols and authority figures. Bennis and Sheppard (pp. 164-182) described authority and leadership in groups in terms of intimacy and trustworthiness. Newman (pp. 591-600) discussed the use of sanctions in authority relationships and described authority styles in terms of permissiveness, sociability, power, and responsibility. He also noted the importance of rightful authority and legality. Koontz wrote of authority as relevant and functional (pp. 611-612). Simon, Smithburg, and Thompson (pp. 461-465) discussed the

essential characteristics of authority as confidence, acceptability, trustworthiness, and legitimacy. They also discussed the use of sanctions by the manager. O'Donnell (pp. 465-467) wrote in terms of acceptability, legality, formality, and coercive authority behavior.

The field of management has not maintained a monopoly on discussions of authority. Sociological literature has also been concerned with the authority relations. As prominent a sociologist as Weber (Shils, 1949) developed three classifications of authority. The first style of authority described by Weber was called traditional; authority which is accepted because it always has been. The second style discussed was bureaucratic; authority which is accepted because it is legal. The third style was charismatic; authority similar to what is often called personal power. Etzioni (1964) depended heavily on Weber's topology of authority and emphasized the concept of legitimacy. He also added the concepts of effectiveness, morality, conformity, power, and the use of rewards.

Blumberg (1969) reviewed a vast amount of sociological literature on industrial settings and came to emphasize the importance of participation in authority. He described studies in terms of authoritarian and democratic leadership patterns and discussed efficiency, interpersonal relationships, satisfaction, motivation, autonomy, recognition, achievement, consideration, and legitimacy. The theme of the entire review provided by Blumberg is that of the importance of participation by subordinates in successful authority relationships.

Dahrendorf (1959) in his classic work on conflict in industrial society defined authority as, " . . . the probability that a command with

a given specific content will be obeyed by a given group of persons" (p. 237). He also discussed the concepts of domination and subjection (in terms of status). Duncan (1962), in an equally important but very different sociological work, followed a Burkian topology of authority. The three elements of Burke's analysis were acceptance, ambivalence or doubt, and rejection. To these elements Duncan added a discussion of equality, tradition, popularity, and use of fear. Duncan also stressed the legitimacy dimension of authority and the relationship that symbols play in creating and legitimizing authority. Friedenberg (Inside Academe, 1972) discussed the student revolts of the 70's in terms of a loss of faith in the legitimacy of authority. He pointed out that, "Legitimacy is the chief lubricant of the social mechanism; it prevents friction by inducing collaboration among its several parts even in situations in which conflict of interest is apparent" (p. 120). In addition to placing a strong emphasis on legitimacy, Friedenberg discussed authority in terms of coercion, respect, threats, hostility, fairness, justice, legality, powerfulness, indulgence, and discipline.

Industrial social-psychology has also added to the literature on authority. Bass (1965) in his text on Organizational Psychology began his discussion of authority by noting the nature of managerial influence on authority. He discussed consideration of workers and initiation of structure as important factors in authority relationships. Bass also used the concepts of position, social ability, persuasiveness, esteem, status, influence, power, legitimacy, conformity, permissiveness, and allowance for participation to describe authority.

Haire (1964) called the supervisor an authority figure who is responsible for more work than he can do alone. He emphasized the importance of hierarchical structure and status differentiations in the authority. Haire discussed both resistance to authority and over-dependence. He presented the major leadership roles of the supervisor as providing information, being supportive, and maintaining discipline. Weick (1969) also dealt with the concept of authority. He placed a particular emphasis on its relation to communication and on the hierarchical nature of authority relationships. He mentioned legitimacy, influence, subordinate control, and acceptability in this regard.

The field of communication has also contributed literature to the study of authority. Much relevant research concerns the small group. Phillips (1966) described three types of leadership in the small group; democratic, autocratic, and permissive. Leadership functions included mediation, initiation, group maintenance, awareness, and control according to Phillips. Redding (Redding and Sanborn, 1964) noted that authority relations are reciprocal and classified the basic organizational (and thus authority) functions as task, maintenance, and human. The basic orientation of Redding's description is communicative. He noted that communication in the organizational setting is structural and personal, formal and informal. He also discussed acceptance, authenticity, initiation, expectancy, dependency, separation, hierarchy, and influence. Haney (1970) described the organizational climate and communication in terms of interdependence, coordination, efficiency, supportiveness, trust, firmness, flexibility, and freedom and



order. In a recent hospital study Jain (1973) concluded communication effectiveness and satisfaction from superior to subordinate are important in organizational success. He further noted that the authority figure must provide a supportive climate with trust and some degree of formality. McCroskey, Jensen, Todd, and Toomb (1972) conducted a factor analytic study of perceptions of sources in organizations. Although the study did not direct its focus specifically on authority (but rather credibility), the results showed factor structures which were labeled competence, character/sociability, extroversion, composure, dynamism, intelligence, and sociability/competence. Since the factor structures showed some variability between sample populations, these researchers concluded that source credibility perceptions are somewhat situational. These authors also noted that there has been little research of an empirical nature on subordinate perceptions in organizations.

Summarizing the vast amount of literature on authority is not an easy task. However, some general conclusions can be drawn. Clearly there have been many descriptions of the use of authority. Much of the literature is based on personal opinion or experience. Empirical research efforts have generally been directed toward small groups or were field studies. Although there is no obvious reason to doubt this vast amount of literature and its conclusions, there have been few efforts aimed specifically at measuring subordinates' perceptions of use of authority in order to test the validity of the conclusions of the literature.

In a very general sense three kinds of statements seem to be frequently made about the use of authority. First, much of the literature on authority

emphasizes the importance of acceptability. Second, the importance of legitimacy or legality seems to be common in many publications on authority. Third, numerous styles of authority are cited and discussed. Although the review of literature in this paper has mentioned many of the descriptions of styles of authority, a complete listing of all descriptions would become prohibitively lengthy. Much of what has been discussed in terms of authority styles can be summarized by several general categories. These categories would include supportiveness, competence, sociability, formality and status, participatory versus reward/punishment, and firmness. These categories may not be all inclusive or mutually exclusive but they served as a basis for examining perceptions of authority in this study.

The purpose of this study was to serve as a preliminary effort to explore subordinate perceptions of authority as measured by semantic differential-type scales through factor analytic techniques in order to determine the dimensional structure which results from subordinate responses to the question of authority use. The research question was: Will the dimensional structure of a factor analysis conducted on the basis of subordinate responses to the use of authority appear as similar to the general trends in descriptions of authority found in the literature (as discussed above)? If the research question were answered in the negative, doubt would be cast on the validity of much of the literature. Obviously this type of research necessarily falls short of rigorous hypothesis testing since the conclusions of a factor analytic study depend on the interpretation of the experimenter rather than on levels of statistical significance (i.e. a factor analysis does not lead to the rejection of null hypotheses).

Although the approach to factor analytic techniques represented by this study is somewhat unorthodox, it is not without value. First, the scales developed in this sort of research can serve as the basis for measuring instruments in further studies on the use of authority. Second, the category structure (based on the labels applied to the factors resulting from the analysis) can provide an empirically derived basis for explanations and interpretations of authority use in organizations. Third, the factor structure discovered can serve as a source for testing the validity for previous discussions of authority.

#### PROCEDURES

This study employed an item pool of 25 semantic differential-type scales (see Appendix I). The polar word pairs for these scales were selected from adjectives most commonly used to describe authority in the literature reviewed or were selected to represent concepts most frequently mentioned in the literature. These scales were arranged randomly in terms of word order and scale order.

The subjects for this study were obtained from the introductory communication course at Ohio University. After two potential subjects declined to participate, a total of 126 subjects' responses were obtained. The subjects were college freshmen and sophomores with approximately equal numbers of males and females.

The subjects were asked to base their responses on perceptions of the use of authority by the principal authority figure in their home (e.g. father, mother, etc.). This authority source was selected for several reasons. Several authors have suggested that attitudes toward authority are first

developed in the home (Bass, 1965, Duncan, 1962) and, thus, responses on familial authority might be expected to be basic to the concept. Additionally, family authority relations were applicable to all subjects and provided a large number of different authority sources (one for each subject) in the study. The experimenter read instructions to the subjects which emphasized the importance of responding in terms of authority use in the family in order to make the concept salient without biasing the responses and which explained the use of semantic differential scales.

The responses received were submitted to a principal components factor analysis and varimax rotation (following procedures of Ohio University Computer Center program FACTA). Unity was inserted in the diagonals and initially, an eigenvalue of 1.0 was established as the criterion for termination of factor extraction. For any scale item to be considered loaded on a resulting factor, a loading of .60 or higher on that factor was required with no loading of .40 or higher on any other factor. For a factor to be considered meaningful, the requirement was set that two scales must have satisfactory loadings on that factor or the factor must show stability in greater than K and less than K solutions.

## RESULTS

The initial factor analysis resulted in a six factor solution which accounted for 65% of the variance (see Appendix I). Fourteen of the scales loaded on these six factors (see Appendix II). The factors were labeled indulgence, formality, sociability, firm and directness, supportiveness, and competency. When the eigenvalue extraction criterion was raised and lowered by 0.1 in two subsequent analyses, four and seven factor solutions

were obtained and each of the original six factors showed stability in at least one of the subsequent analyses (see Appendix II). In the six factor solution only the formal-informal scale loaded on the formality factor; however, this scale loaded on both subsequent analyses indicating stability. Thus, formality was considered to be a meaningful factor.

### CONCLUSIONS

The results indicated that the subjects were able to evaluate authority figures on a majority of the scales provided. A six factor solution which accounts for 65% of the variance seemed to indicate that the saliency of the subjects' relationships with the authority figure was sufficient for the purposes of this measuring effort. Further study is required to validate the test as a true measure of perceptions of use of authority.

The factors of competency, supportiveness, firm and directness, and formality are relatively easy to interpret. The indulgency factor is somewhat more difficult to understand. The two scales which loaded on that factor, indulgent-strict and like I expect-not like I expect, do not seem particularly logically related. A reasonable explanation may be that the subjects interpreted the like-I-expect scale to mean "getting what I want." If this was the case the nature of the factor becomes clearer.

The sociability factor presents a particular problem of interpretation. This factor showed little stability in the subsequent analyses (see Appendix II). Also, there is not a great deal of logical relationship between the concepts of trustworthiness, fairness, and friendliness. At this point in factor analytic research on the use of authority explanations can only be tentative, at best. For example, although the scales of trustworthiness,

fairness, and friendliness are similar to scales which have been called sociability in previous research (see McCroskey, Jensen, Todd, and Toomb, 1972), the title of openness has also been suggested as a description.

One result of this study was that no factors which could be labeled legitimacy or acceptability were extracted. This finding seems to contradict the anticipations for the study mentioned in the introduction. If there were no subject perceptions of legitimacy, some doubt would be cast on the literature which made frequent reference to the importance of legitimacy and acceptability in use of authority. Before the concepts of legitimacy and acceptability are rejected as important determinants in subject perception of authority use, it would be wise to examine some tentative explanations of this study's failure to show such factors.

One possible explanation is that in family situations the question of legitimacy is left unquestioned and is not salient to the subject even though styles of authority use are apparent and salient. In this sense the failure of legitimacy and acceptability factors to appear may be artifactual. A second explanation became apparent after careful inspection of all three analyses.

In the factor initially labeled sociability, depending on which solution was inspected, a large number of logically very different scales loaded. In addition to the three scales which loaded on the six factor solution, the other analyses showed loadings on the scales of strength, effectiveness, acceptability, legitimacy, sincerity, reasonability, relevance, and expectance. In addition to indicating the instability of this factor, it would appear that more than one dimension of perception of authority may be clustering in a single factor. If this is the case, there must be



a close relationship between these various dimensions which cluster together.

A number of authors (esp. Duncan, 1962) have stated that there is a relationship between symbols and authority behavior and the legitimacy (or acceptability) of the authority figure. In other words, certain behaviors on the part of the authority figure may result in perceptions of legitimacy. This would suggest that items which measure perceptions of behaviors which lead to judgments of legitimacy and the item evaluations of legitimacy (or acceptability) themselves will cluster together in a single factor. Simply put, if fairness, friendliness, sincerity, etc. are the behaviors of a supervisor which lead to perceptions of legitimacy or acceptability, these concepts should be rated similarly to scales of legitimacy. This is sufficient to explain the wide variety of scales which loaded on the sociability factor but it is not sufficient to explain why, generally, the same scales did not load for each factor solution.

The above discussion might suggest that the scales representing behaviors leading to perceptions of legitimacy and the scales of legitimacy itself should load nearly identically. Heston (1973) presented an argument which is relevant to this discussion. She noted that there is no a priori reason to believe that the most extreme rating on a scale (for example, intelligence) represents the ideal rating for credibility. In the context of this study, the figure rated as moderately sincere or moderately friendly might be perceived as highly legitimate (or acceptable) while the highly sincere or friendly authority figure is not perceived as highly legitimate. This line of thinking provides a possible explanation of the instability of

the sociability (and a possibly legitimacy/acceptability) dimension. Clearly all of the above speculation can only be considered tentative until further research is conducted.

In conclusion, this study has shown that subjects asked to respond to the use of authority are able to make reasonably reliable judgments. If these judgments accurately reflect perceptions of the use of authority, the results of the study indicate that the descriptions of the use of authority which emphasized the styles of supportiveness, competence, formality, and firmness as critical elements in authority use are substantially correct. Further, there is some reason to believe, based on the findings of this study, that to measure legitimacy and acceptability of authority the scale items designed to tap these dimensions must be distinguished from items which measure behaviors of authority figures which lead to judgments on these two dimensions.

The heuristic value of this kind of research cannot be ignored. Factor analytic research on perceptions of authority use can be of greater scope than simply determining dimensions of the perceptions. If measuring instruments of the kind used in this study (whether situationally or generally validated) are developed, the opportunity for studying differential communicative behaviors which lead to perceptions of authority as legitimate or acceptable (or which lead to perceptions of particular styles of authority use such as supportiveness) can become possible. The kind of research attempted here could provide the tools for empirically grounded qualitative research into the development, maintenance, and understanding of authority.



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# APPENDIX 1

## Rotated Factor Loadings for the Six Factor Solution

| Scale   | Factor     |           |             |                     |                 |            |
|---|------------|-----------|-------------|---------------------|-----------------|------------|
|   | Indulgence | Formality | Sociability | Firm and Directness | Supportive-ness | Competency |
| reasonable/unreasonable                       | .43        | -.04      | .59         | -.08                | -.33            | .22        |
| *indulgent/strict                             | .71        | .30       | .06         | .17                 | .04             | .03        |
| *trustworthy/not trustworthy                  | .10        | -.06      | .73         | -.17                | -.12            | .34        |
| *unsympathetic/sympathetic                    | .18        | .01       | -.33        | .15                 | .66             | -.34       |
| *strong/weak                                  | -.32       | -.39      | .28         | .05                 | -.15            | .48        |
| *ambiguous/straight forward                   | -.11       | .10       | .11         | .70                 | .34             | -.15       |
| ineffective/effective                         | .05        | .26       | -.54        | .32                 | .23             | -.35       |
| *informal/formal                              | .18        | .78       | .03         | .10                 | -.10            | -.02       |
| *fair/unfair                                  | .35        | -.01      | .73         | -.15                | -.24            | .14        |
| *competent/incompetent                        | .15        | .13       | .33         | -.28                | -.06            | .61        |
| *threatening/encouraging                      | -.09       | .04       | -.40        | .17                 | .58             | -.20       |
| *irresponsible/responsible                    | -.10       | .06       | -.06        | .16                 | .17             | -.83       |
| *coercive/persuasive                          | -.24       | -.14      | -.07        | -.04                | .70             | -.25       |
| consistent/inconsistent                       | .03        | -.15      | .51         | -.48                | -.19            | .28        |
| unacceptable/acceptable                       | -.18       | -.09      | -.47        | .15                 | -.12            | .47        |
| legitimate/illegitimate                       | .20        | .18       | .55         | -.12                | -.12            | .47        |
| *friendly/unfriendly                          | .10        | .08       | .64         | -.05                | -.30            | .37        |
| sincere/insincere                             | -.01       | .08       | .62         | -.00                | -.13            | .51        |
| *like I expect/not like I expect              | .62        | .02       | .32         | -.03                | -.10            | .18        |
| insecure/confident                            | -.24       | .25       | -.35        | .35                 | .03             | -.48       |
| equal acting/superior acting                  | .10        | .41       | .62         | .13                 | -.04            | -.07       |
| illegal/legal                                 | .17        | -.47      | -.39        | .37                 | .00             | -.38       |
| *intelligent/unintelligent                    | .08        | .17       | .26         | -.18                | -.27            | .69        |
| *wavering/firm                                | .28        | -.07      | -.17        | .76                 | -.15            | -.18       |
| irrelevant to situation/relevant to situation | -.47       | .14       | -.40        | .47                 | .26             | -.19       |
| Eigenvalue                                    | 1.06       | 1.04      | 9.42        | 1.28                | 1.16            | 2.36       |
| Variance                                      | 7.95       | 6.18      | 19.13       | 8.94                | 8.27            | 14.87      |

Totals

Eigenvalue

16.32

Percent of Variance accounted for 65%

\*scales recommended for further research

# APPENDIX II

## Factors Extracted and Scales Loaded for the Three Factor Analyses

| Solution  |              | I  | II                 | III   | IV                             | V  | VI                                      | VII  |
|---|--------------|--|--------------------|---|--------------------------------|--|---|--|
| Six Factors<br>Eigenvalue extraction<br>criterion 1.0<br>Percent of variance<br>Accounted for 65%   | <u>Label</u> | indulgent<br>like I<br>expect  | informal           | trustworthy<br>fair<br>friendly   | straight-<br>forward<br>firm   | sympathetic<br>encouraging<br>persuasive | responsible<br>competent<br>intelligent |  |
|   |              | <u>indulgence</u>  | <u>formality</u>   | <u>sociability</u>  | <u>firm and<br/>directness</u> | <u>supportiveness</u>                    | <u>competency</u>                       |  |
|   |              | equal-<br>acting   | informal<br>strong | fair<br>reasonable<br>relevant<br>like I expect                                       | straight-<br>forward<br>firm   | encouraging<br>persuasive                | responsible<br>competent<br>intelligent | sympathetic  |
| Seven Factors<br>Eigenvalue extraction<br>criterion .90<br>Percent of variance<br>Accounted for 69% | <u>Label</u> | equality/<br>status<br>(new factor<br>not related<br>to the above<br>factor) | <u>formality</u>   | <u>situation</u>  | <u>firm and<br/>directness</u> | <u>supportiveness</u>                    | <u>competency</u>                       | sympathy<br>(extended<br>factor of<br>supportive-<br>ness) |
|   |              | indulgent<br>like I<br>expect  | informal           | trustworthy<br>friendly<br>strong<br>effective<br>acceptable<br>legitimate<br>sincere | straight-<br>forward<br>firm   |  |   |  |
|   |              | <u>indulgence</u>  | <u>formality</u>   | <u>sociability/<br/>legitimacy</u>  | <u>firm and<br/>directness</u> |  |   |  |
| Four Factors<br>Eigenvalue extraction<br>criterion 1.1<br>Percent of variance<br>Accounted for 57%  | <u>Label</u> |  |                    |   |                                |  |   |  |
|   |              |  |                    |   |                                |  |   |  |
|   |              |  |                    |   |                                |  |   |  |

NOTE: In the four factor solution factors V, VI, and VII tended to collapse into factor III.